



From left to right: Joel Krupa - Executive Director, Justin Pollard - Finance Director, Ron Quirt - Production Supervisor Trainer, Mike Smith - Plant Supervisor

The case for recycling

By Sharon Kennedy

When I was young, recycling meant burning paper in the kitchen woodstove and taking cans, glass bottles, and an assortment of miscellaneous trash to the ravine down the road where it was dumped. Most families who lived on a farm did the same thing. Items that could be burned like letters, newspapers, cardboard, and the like were thrown in the woodstove. Along with small sticks, they made good kindling to start the morning fire.

Things that couldn't be burned were dumped. This required a little preparation. Paper labels were peeled off canned goods. Mom didn't want nosy relatives on the sideroad poking through our trash and gossiping about what we had consumed. One of my chores was rinsing the empty cans before I stepped on them. Mom was concerned an animal might smell food and stick its head in the can, thus they were crushed to avoid potential traps for skunks, raccoons, and various

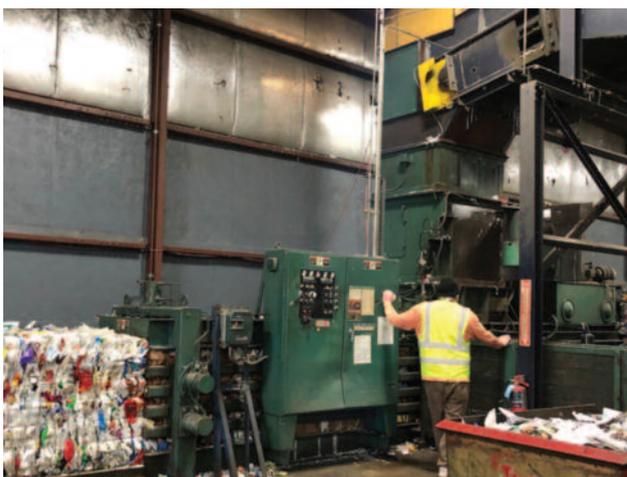
rodents. Glass bottles were rinsed and their caps tightly screwed back on.

Once a month or so Dad loaded the trash onto a makeshift trailer hitched behind the tractor. We owned the land where the ravine was and nobody gave a second thought to what harm, if any, was created from our dump. In the 1950s and well before that, private dumps were a normal part of farm life. Garbage was fed to the pigs so no food went into the dump which was the only solution for the disposal of useless items. I've given this introduction to tell readers what it was like in the old days before recycling became a business that helps protect our environment.

Last fall I made an appointment and took lawnmower and tractor oil to the recycling center in Sault Ste. Marie on the day they accepted hazardous waste. I was impressed by the efficiency of the operation, the pleasant attitude of the workers, and



Baler



Conveyer and Baler

their helpfulness in removing the containers containing the oil. Months later I was attending a Progressive Women's meeting in the Soo and one of the ladies mentioned I should write an article about Northern Transitions, Inc. (NTI). I balked at the idea because interviewing isn't easy for me. However, the more I thought about it, the more I realized people might like to know what happens to their recyclables once they throw them in the bins at the recycling center.

I called NTI and spoke with Executive Director Joel Krupa. He was receptive to the idea. What follows is information provided by Joel and Finance Director Justin Pollard. I think readers will find it as interesting as I have.

"In the late 1980s, the idea of a recycling program was started by a number of community-minded individuals who were affiliated with the non-profit Soo Sheltered Workshop, the former name of Northern Transitions, Inc.," Joel said. "The Workshop had been

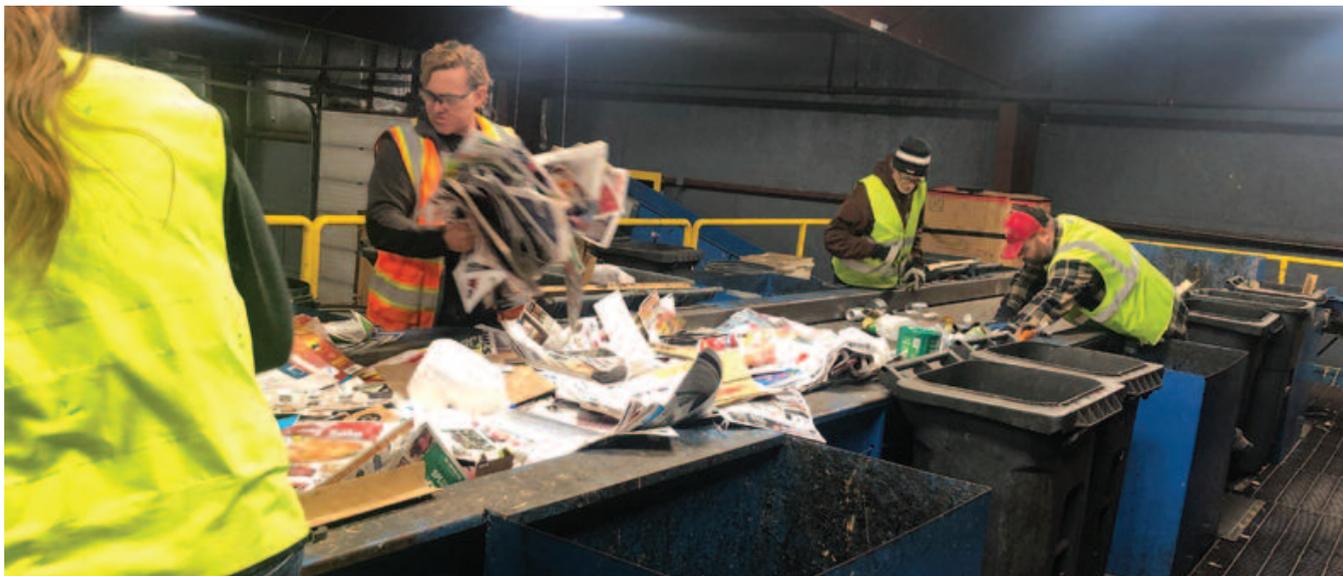
in operation since 1968. Visionary persons saw an environmental need for recycling services as well as employment opportunities for people with challenges. The idea germinated into a plan of action wherein NTI developed a dual purpose program. While creating a full-service recycling center, they would also be fulfilling a basic mission—to provide special needs residents a means of employment. This would assist them in overcoming barriers and becoming more self-reliant, self-supporting, and contributing members of society.

"In 1989 the program began in a 3,000 square foot corner of the NTI building on West Easterday Avenue. There was one drop-off site, a limited range of accepted recyclable materials, and one small vertical baler. A year later the voters of Chippewa County passed a recycling millage. This was very forward thinking as recycling was a relatively new idea and few places, including most large cities, did not yet have a recycling program. With the millage monies and additional state grant funds, the program was expanded. The endeavor, which successfully stood the test of time and continues today, was a collaborative effort between the Chippewa County Commission and its townships, the Sault Ste. Marie City Commission, and Northern Transitions, Inc. Board of Directors.

"A year later, the recycling operation moved to its present location. The renovation enabled us to house a large auto-tie horizontal baler which is more versatile because the material is fed vertically and compressed horizontally allowing it to make different lengths of bales. Most of the shredded paper produced in NTI's confidential shred operation, i.e., documents with personal information, is baled by the original vertical baler from 30 years ago.

"In 1994 we obtained an interest free loan from the State of Michigan. This allowed for expansion of the program. Additional equipment was purchased and renovation of our building resulted in the use of the entire 20,000 square footage. We have two forklifts, one skid steer, and two pickup trucks. One is modified with a cage for picking up cardboard at local businesses and organizations, and the other is used for hauling the recycling trailers located throughout the townships. In 2002 grant money was obtained to purchase the household hazardous waste building located next to the recycling center.

"You asked a question regarding the emptying of the bins. It may seem like everything in the separate bins is dumped together, but paper and tin are dumped separately on the conveyer belt to make the sorting process more efficient. The only things that commingle are various plastics. Most of the recyclables that are mixed together come from the 16 recycling drop-off trailer sites placed throughout Chippewa County



Deb G., Ron Q., Gary B. and Ron H. sorting paper on the sort line.



Dennis D. baling shredded paper.

townships. Through educational outreach we hope to limit the commingling of products. The more we educate and inform recyclers, the more efficient and cleaner the recycling process will be. We do not accept Styrofoam because it is rarely recycled. In fact, there are few recycling programs in the United States that do accept it. We clearly state on our building that Styrofoam is not acceptable.

“We ask that people rinse out cans and jars before dropping them off. It’s a waste of everyone’s time and effort when the materials are dirty. Dirty recyclables

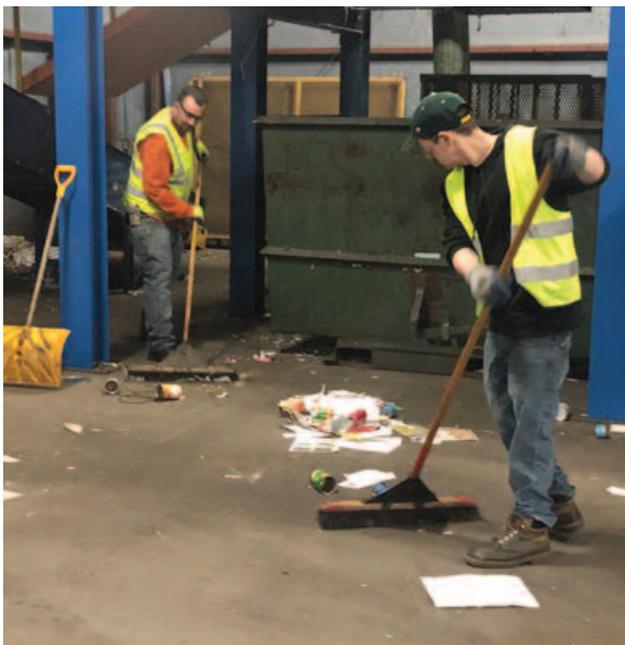
are actually trash and go into the trash compactor. We cannot bale dirty materials because manufacturers require everything they receive to be clean in order to create quality recycled products. Once the materials are sorted on the sort line, they’re transported to the baler for a final quality control check. Bales are made with the wide-mouth, open-ended auto-tie baler. We also utilize a glass crusher, a can densifier, and the vertical baler for shredded paper.

“The worst part of the job is cleaning up trash that does not belong here. This usually occurs when individuals do not follow our recycling guidelines posted outside our building and on our website. Contaminates can turn our clean recyclable products into trash, something we try to reduce as best we can. We strive for clean and safe recycling for our 30 employees. We work collectively with our staff, the community of recyclers, and other participants to accomplish this goal.

“You wanted to know what becomes of our baled products. The finished bales go to various mills throughout the U.S. To keep freight costs down, we try to keep them in Michigan. Some of our plastics get recycled into decking or auto parts. Others become lawn furniture and some are turned into new plastic bottles. Cardboard becomes new cardboard or box board used to make cereal and/or tissue boxes. Paper is turned back into more paper or cardboard. We send our products to end users and brokers who then reuse the products for their intended use. Glass is used as aggregate or to make new glass bottles. Magazines are sent with paper to paper mills, and metals are sent to metal plants where they are melted down and turned into new metal products.



Finished baled cardboard and paper.



Sean M. and Ray B. Cleaning up under the sort line.

“We make every effort to show the people of our county they are receiving a service that has good value and that recycling monies are being well spent. The positive impact of recycling is beneficial to our community as well as to our planet for future generations. As long as Chippewa County residents continue to vote for the recycling millage, there will never be a charge to residents for the disposal of non-hazardous materials. We do charge \$1.10 per pound for hazardous waste and a small fee for the disposal of electronics. This is necessary to offset the costs we incur when disposing of them. More information is available on our Facebook page and our website at www.northerntransitions.org. We are grateful to the

voters, for without their support the recycling program could not exist.”

Joel said that since 1990 the program has been popular with voters as evidenced by a millage vote in 2018 that passed by an 80% margin. He said the busiest time of year for the center is between May and September when they hold their Household Hazardous Waste Events and host an Open House when area residents are invited to view the recycling process.

Some interesting facts include the size of the bales and the amount of work completed in an average day. Justin said office paper and mixed paper such as newspapers, letters, and magazines create the heaviest bales averaging 1,600-2,000 pounds per bale. Cardboard averages between 1,500-1,800 pounds, No. 3-7 grade plastics between 1,200-1,500 pounds, No. 2 plastics 1,000 pounds, and the lightest is No. 1 plastics with an average weight of 800 pounds. Depending upon the workload, the amount of recycled bales varies daily. In recent months the daily amount baled was 8,000-10,000 pounds. Well over 120,000,000 pounds have been recycled since the program began.

I would like to thank Executive Director Joel Krupa, Finance Director Justin Pollard, Plant Supervisor Mike Smith, and Production Supervisor/Trainer Ron Quirt for allowing me to write this article and for providing the photographs. Thank goodness for our recycling center, the employees who work on the floor, the visionary men and women who made it possible, and the voters who guarantee its continuance. Without them I might still be dumping recyclables in the old ravine on our property.■

Sharon Kennedy is a freelance writer from Brimley. Her articles combine nostalgic glimpses of the past with present day observations. Sharon Kennedy's book *Life in a Tin Can* is available through Amazon and she can be reached at sharonkennedy1947@gmail.com.